



Analysing European Romanticism

Goethe

Goethe was mentioned by Friedrich Schlegel along with the French Revolution and Fichte as one of the three great tendencies of the Romantic age. If Homer was the benchmark figure for the Greeks in the lost classical age so Goethe, for the Romantics, was the benchmark figure of modernity. The early Romantics desperately wanted Goethe to be one of them, and to join in with their notion of the new classicism of the modern age as a progressively evolving canon of literary revelations. For his part, the equally urbane Goethe readily associated with the first Romantic circle despite their precocious bohemian and often impertinent behaviour. He recognised their talent and even allowed himself to be advised by August Wilhelm Schlegel on questions of classical poetics, which he knew the learned elder Schlegel understood better than he. Goethe conversely exercised his influence over the Romantics whenever they wrote excessively provocative works which threatened the equilibrium of the German Republic of letters over which he ruled. When Novalis and the philosopher Schelling in typically Romantic fashion wrote equal and opposite tracts on the highly controversial issue of post revolutionary religious renewal, Goethe was consulted, advised against publication altogether, and was obeyed. But of course Goethe could never have joined forces with the Romantics on their mission. He was a Romantic figure in many respects, especially in his belief that nature was inhabited by a larger spirit, but Goethe simply did not share the radical mentality of these young Turks. He did not sympathise with the extreme views which their passionate pursuit of authenticity drove them to adopt. Too many of their preoccupations seemed like the unwelcome reprise of problems which he had confronted in his own youth, and dealt with in his first novel, *The Sufferings of Young Werther*, the urgent need for religious renewal, the uncompromising demand for self fulfilment, where manic exploration of metaphysical vortices, the wilful public posturing and the suspicion that Romanticism, despite its noisy rhetoric and because of its love of paradox, was not really about very much after all. Goethe broke with the last of the Romantic circle definitively in around 1809, and for the rest of his career produced a constant stream of enjoyably vitriolic denunciations of Romanticism, which colour our view of the movement to this day. Romanticism was sick, his own classicism healthy. Romanticism has sunk into an abyss; its most awful productions could scarcely sink any lower. Romanticism was a twenty years' monstrosity which he wanted to bomb. The Romantics' excess humour was bound to decay into dull-wittedness and melancholy. The Schlegels may have been talented but finally they were victims of egotism and weakness, and how Friedrich in particular endlessly chewed the cud of moral and religious absurdities. As for the Romantics, Novalis's unfinished novel, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, perhaps encapsulates their final position best. Like Friedrich Schlegel's critical *Übermeister*, this is another Romantic answer to Wilhelm Meister's *Years of Apprenticeship*. *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* is the story of a young man who discovers in himself the Romantic vocation of poesy, and whose life finally exemplifies the complete transformation of the real world into a Utopian vision, the Romantic vision of poesy itself. It contains a portrait of Goethe in the charismatic figure of Klingsor, a dignified, authoritative man of middle years with a wide brow, a mischievous smile, and a magnetic, black-eyed gaze. It is Klingsor Goethe, no less, who completes this young man's poetic training before he fulfils his mission. But if Klingsor is the master, it is Heinrich who surpasses the achievement of the master, and who does so precisely through his infinite esteem of the transformative power of poesy. Thus this novel, despite its homage to the master, is in truth a subtle Romantic critique of Goethe's own standpoint, for Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, as Novalis clearly understood, is the tale of a young man who grows up by understanding that poesy, despite its imaginative power, is not going to change the world and who therefore gives up a literary vocation to engage in unglamorous, concrete professional labour for the betterment of the human lot. *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* then marks the parting of the ways for the Romantics and Goethe by condemning the master's great novel, as Novalis later noted, as 'the gospel of economics'.